

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-4

THE BALTIMORE SUN
22 February 1983

Bulgaria winces under hostile scrutiny from abroad

By Anthony Barbieri, Jr.
Sun Staff Correspondent

Sofia, Bulgaria — On the highest hill of the nicest suburb of this somewhat sleepy capital city stands the sparkling new Hotel Vitosha, opened two years ago to symbolize Bulgaria's transformation from Balkan backwater to modern socialist state.

Built lovingly by the Japanese, the hotel is strictly for the hard-currency trade — Western businessmen, tourists and skiers. Its 19th floor gambling casino, its risqué nightclub floor show, and its array of pricey boutiques are all intended to extract the maximum number of dollars and marks and francs from the paying customers.

But with the Vitosha, as with Bulgaria's intended image of itself in general, something misfired along the way. Today, the hotel stands as a symbol of a different kind.

To the despair of the country's image-makers, the allegations of a Bulgarian connection to the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II have placed the spotlight not on the modern Bulgaria but on the black arts for which the Balkans were once so justifiably renowned: terrorism and gun-running, drug dealing and smuggling, black marketeering and corruption.

Western officials contend that much of this activity is centered in Sofia, and that in Sofia it is centered at the Hotel Vitosha.

The hotel does attract large numbers of businessmen and tourists. But, like top hotels in other Soviet bloc capitals, such as Warsaw, Bucharest and East Berlin, it also has become a kind of social club-playhouse for the large, semi-permanent community of Arabs and Turks who find that by playing on Eastern Europe's flourishing black markets they can parlay relatively modest amounts of Western currency into a luxurious existence.

The most illustrious alumnus of this Bulgarian netherworld is Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish terrorist now serving a life sentence in Italy for shooting the pope in Rome's St. Peter's Square May 13, 1981.

Agca supposedly spent 50 days at the Vitosha the year before the shooting. There he was allegedly under the tutelage of Bekir Celenk, a self-described businessman known locally as the "godfather of the Turkish mafia."

Agca has told Italian authorities Mr. Celenk offered him \$1.25 million to kill the pope and has implicated three Bulgarian officials, one of whom has been arrested in Italy.

Mr. Celenk says he is merely a business executive and denies ever having met Agca, at the Vitosha or anywhere else. Bulgarian authorities say they don't know whether Mr. Celenk is a gangster, but until they find out he will not be allowed to leave Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian official held by the Italians, Sergei I. Antonov, is the Bulgarian connection that links the assassination attempt to the Bulgarian secret service, to its Soviet KGB controllers, and then to the current Soviet Communist Party leader, Yuri V. Andropov, who at the time of the shooting was chief of the KGB.

While Bulgarian officials heatedly and categorically deny any connection whatsoever between the Bulgarian government, the Bulgarian secret service or any Bulgarian citizen and the plot, they fret that the whole imbroglio has given Bulgaria a reputation as the anything-goes sewer of the Soviet bloc.

Boyan Traikov, head of the official government news agency, BTA, and since December full-time spokesman and official denier of the Bulgarian connection, said recently that his "anger and disgust" about the charges of a plot against the pope and the accompanying allegations of smuggling, dope dealing and gun-running in Sofia has grown into "several categories and sub-categories of anger and disgust."

He expressed astonishment that it would be believed "that Soviet-Bulgarian relations could have such a vile character," that the Kremlin would order Bulgaria to kill the pope and that Bulgaria would comply.

He also said he was dismayed that the conspiracy case would be fabricated and that because of it one innocent Bulgarian is in jail and Italy and two others are wanted.

(To this list, another Bulgarian government official added that he was offended anyone would think Bulgaria would have taken on the job and botched it. "If there was really a Bulgarian connection, the pope would be dead," he said.

(When his visitor's jaw dropped at the remark, the official hastily added, "Of course, I'm only joking. But, you know, in something like this we wouldn't make a mistake.")

In short, says Mr. Traikov, it comes down to the fact that "unsophisticated" people the world over are looking up from their newspapers each morning and saying, "Oh, those Bulgarians!"

The last time Bulgaria made such a splash in the world was probably 1979, when reports from London and Paris alleged that its secret service was wiping out emigre foes with poisoned umbrellas.

There also has been the assassination of a Turkish diplomat — nothing unusual — and a student riot — Iraqis against Iraqis — but nothing major league by Western standards.

CONTINUED